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FM AMEMBASSY WARSAW  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8428  
INFO RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE  
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0307  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0114  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L WARSAW 000603

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/09/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [NATO](#) [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [MARR](#) [PL](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: POLISH RESOLVE IN AFGHANISTAN STILL STRONG

Classified By: CDA Quanrud by reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Poland is a leading troop contributor in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and senior Polish officials voice strong support for the effort. But Poland, like many other NATO allies, is not immune to the effects of a long campaign that has not enjoyed public support. President Kaczynski's senior security advisors have continually criticized the government's conduct of the war; a recent uptick in Taliban attacks has challenged Polish staying power; and a May op ed by the Sejm Speaker asserted that Poland has no direct interests in Afghanistan. The ongoing trial of seven soldiers accused of killing Afghan civilians in 2007 has further complicated military service in Afghanistan. The case has led to debate as to whether Polish soldiers suffer from a "Nangar Khel Syndrome" (a reluctance to fire that could put troops at risk), and whether or not the GoP provides due support -- including legal assistance -- to its troops. Taken together, these developments might suggest a wavering of the Polish commitment to ISAF, but we see them as part of a normal, democratic discussion. Even as casualties mount, Poland's resolve in Afghanistan should remain firm, provided that her Allies are perceived as valuing and reciprocating Polish sacrifice. END SUMMARY.

#### MISSION BASED ON STRONG POLITICAL CONSENSUS

¶2. (SBU) Poland's 2,000 soldiers in Ghazni Province constitute the 7th largest contingent among ISAF's 42 troop contributing nations. With no national caveats placed on the use of its forces, the troops actively patrol against Taliban insurgents. Ten soldiers have been killed, mostly due to combat action, and more than two dozen wounded. Overcoming significant budgetary constraints, the GoP increased troop strength in March to its current level, cutting back on non-NATO peacekeeping operations elsewhere. Official political support for ISAF remains strong and generally non-partisan but, as in other European nations, opinion polls indicate that roughly 70-80% of the general public oppose the mission. In spite of the financial strains and weak public support, the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Defense Minister consistently speak out in favor of the mission. President Kaczynski is among the strongest proponents.

¶3. (SBU) Nonetheless, a series of recent events have sparked debate over Poland's military role in Afghanistan. On May 18, Sejm Speaker Bronislaw Komorowski, a member of the ruling Civic Platform party and close associate of the Prime Minister, questioned the current prioritization of the country's foreign military engagements, calling in particular for limitations on the ISAF presence. In an op ed, Komorowski wrote that Poland "does not have and will not have

any national interests" at stake in Afghanistan. Over the past several weeks, the President's National Security Chief Aleksander Szczyglo strongly criticized the Defense Ministry's handling of the operation in Ghazni, suggesting May 29 that it was a mistake to assume responsibility, and the ensuing risks, for the entire province. These public statements occur against the backdrop of the ongoing trial of seven soldiers accused of killing Afghan civilians in Nangar Khel in August 2007, the first time Polish troops have been tried for violations of The Hague and Geneva Conventions. The trial has raised concerns that a so-called Nangar Khel Syndrome might compel soldiers to take fewer risks (or to incur unnecessary casualties themselves) in close combat situations. The trial has also intensified discussion concerning the extent to which the Government will (or will not) support its individual soldiers. Finally, a sharp uptick in combat action in Ghazni over the past month has heightened the risk of further casualties, which could impact on Poland's willingness to stay the course in Afghanistan.

#### "NANGAR KHEL SYNDROME"

14. (C) The arrest of the seven soldiers involved in the August 2007 Nangar Khel incident shocked the nation, giving rise to speculation about politicized investigations and alleged cover-ups. A preliminary report drafted by Antoni Macierewicz of the Military Counterintelligence Service (SKW) blamed the accused for deliberately shooting the civilians, including women and children. A later, more comprehensive investigation suggested that the shooting was unintentional, but the charges have not been dropped. Media reporting has focused on conflicts and rivalries between SKW on the one hand and military police and regular troops on the other. In February 2008, a national television station suggested that commanders on the ground had tried to hush up the incident. Aleksander Szczyglo, who was Defense Minister at the time, lost his temper during the broadcast, stating that he could not be responsible for a "group of idiots who shot at civilians." He later apologized for the remark and said he had not intended to determine the soldiers' guilt or innocence. Szczyglo also denied during trial testimony last month that the SKW had sought to steer the course of the investigation toward a conclusion of premeditation. Polish media earlier noted that Polish troops were serving under a U.S. commander at the time of the incident, and were relying on U.S. intelligence, but there has been little negative commentary on the U.S. role. On the contrary, Defense Minister Klich said publicly that the U.S. commander at the time had convinced him the soldiers were innocent.

15. (C) The incident has left its mark upon rank-and-file soldiers, who may now be more cautious in implementing the rules of engagement. In August 2008, Defense Minister Klich acknowledged the existence of Nangar Khel Syndrome among the troops. Government spokesman Pawel Gras said both the PM and DefMin had received information about the problem. Gras added that to perform effectively, soldiers must believe they have the backing of the state in such situations, including legal assistance. In his trial testimony last month, Klich said he believed the shooting had been accidental. He also greeted the soldier-defendants in the courtroom to signal GoP solidarity. Military and government officials assert that the armed forces have learned valuable lessons, and are now using the Nangar Khel incident as part of the training regimen for troops preparing for deployment to Afghanistan. According to Jacek Januchowski of the MFA's Security Policy Department, the incident has not become a major operational factor in Ghazni, as evidenced by the Polish contingent's continuing active patrolling in the province. Januchowski added that Afghan President Karzai had praised the Poles' transparent handling of a tragic incident.

#### WHAT'S BEHIND SENIOR OFFICIALS' PUBLIC COMMENTS?

16. (C) Sejm Speaker Komorowski's comments about foreign deployments do not appear to portend a break in the strong political consensus on Afghanistan. The MFA's Januchowski said Komorowski's remarks merely reflected the continual

review of foreign engagements by the Government and parliament to ensure the missions' effectiveness. He asserted that Parliament's support for the effort in Afghanistan remained strong. Beata Gorka-Winter, an analyst with PISM, agreed that despite the occasional difference of opinion within the Sejm, the consensus still strongly favored deployment in Afghanistan. Gorka-Winter suggested that Komorowski had sought to obtain a greater say for the Sejm on deployment issues, and to voice growing desperation about the state of the national budget, especially the defense budget. Szczyglo's criticism of the Government's ISAF deployment strategy was highly political, mirroring President Kaczynski's conviction that Prime Minister Tusk is soft on national security issues. The GoP's March decision to increase troop levels by 400 was in part a response to pressure from the President and Szczyglo, and security experts do not rule out further calls for increases by the President and his staff.

IS THERE A POLISH TIPPING POINT?

17. (C) What might cause a Polish withdrawal from Afghanistan? Despite the government's sensitivity regarding casualties, an uptick would likely not mean the end of the Polish contingent. Following the deaths of Polish soldiers in February 2008 and again in August 2008, Tusk publicly stated that the sacrifices were worthwhile and in direct support of the allied effort in Afghanistan. In April 2009, he reportedly told UK PM Gordon Brown that the Polish presence would remain as long as needed. Joanna Nikorowicz, a security specialist in the Prime Minister's Office, told us Tusk would not back down even if a higher casualty rate began to affect his own presidential political ambitions. PISM's Gorka-Winter concurred that Poles were too stubborn to quit and would do their best to maintain allied solidarity. She noted that there had not been a major public outcry after previous casualty announcements in Iraq or Afghanistan, even from victims' families. Barring an unforeseen catastrophe in Afghanistan, Gorka-Winter believed that casualties would not play a major role in inducing a Polish withdrawal.

18. (C) Equipment and other resource shortfalls in Afghanistan were also not major considerations. The Polish contingent is short of armored vehicles and other protective equipment, and the GoP has requested U.S. help in securing more Mine Resistant, Ambush Protected vehicles (MRAPs). Individual Polish soldiers also complained of equipment shortfalls, especially in the early part of the campaign. These deficiencies are serious and could increase the number of casualties but, according to GoP officials, they are unlikely, per se, to tip Poland away from its ISAF commitment. However, persistent shortages could impact on tactical decisions such as those regarding the frequency of patrols.

19. (C) Perhaps the biggest contributor to a Polish withdrawal would be a perceived lack of allied solidarity, and not just in Afghanistan. Polish officials view the ISAF deployment as a major test for NATO and the U.S., which are the best guarantors of Poland's security. Poles have participated actively in Alliance expeditionary missions, but the quid pro quo has been Warsaw's insistence that NATO must also come to Poland's defense in the event of an Article V contingency. If any Polish government concluded that the Alliance would likely not honor its territorial defense commitments, then the Poles would be hard-pressed to justify their continuing sacrifice in Afghanistan. For this reason, Poland is counting on a planned revision of NATO's Strategic Concept to rebalance expeditionary and territorial defense missions. The Poles also have strong expectations regarding U.S. security assistance. Polish officials and analysts warn of the damage to U.S. credibility if the U.S. failed to live up to its commitment to deploy a rotation of Patriot missiles in Poland. Such a disappointment would be perceived in many quarters as the West abandoning Poland again, and could contribute to a re-assessment of the Polish return on its investment in Afghanistan.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The political bluster in recent weeks, along with the ongoing Nangar Khel trial, might create the impression that Poland's resolve in Afghanistan is wavering. However, we view these events as normal occurrences in any vibrant, democratic society. Polish public opinion leans heavily against the ISAF deployment, but the opposition is relatively shallow and poorly organized. We see little evidence that the political consensus in favor of the mission has changed significantly, but caution that we cannot assume Polish willingness to support the U.S. and NATO indefinitely without tangible signals that Polish sacrifices are appreciated.

QUANRUD